

Supporting Forcibly Displaced Families Experiencing Food Insecurity



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As of
December 16, 2025

Many forcibly displaced families, even those who are working, depend on food benefits and local supports like food banks or free and reduced-price school meals. Recent federal policy changes, funding cuts, and new regulations have made it harder for these clients to access and afford food. As food insecurity rises, families are increasingly turning to local organizations and providers they know and trust for help.

This document is designed to help providers understand what's changing, plan how their organization can respond, and find practical ways to lessen the impact on families. It also offers guidance for supporting families who may be anxious, frustrated, or overwhelmed—and for managing the stress that providers may feel as well.

Background

Numerous government actions are impacting the ability of many families to access and afford food, including forcibly displaced people. The situation is complex and still unfolding, but here is what is known as of 12/16/2025:

Decreased SNAP Eligibility – On July 4, 2025, H.R. 1—known as the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA)—was signed into law. The law restricted access to federal food assistance (SNAP) for several groups who had previously qualified, including refugees, asylees, and survivors of trafficking (T-visa) or domestic violence (U-visa) who had not yet become lawful permanent residents (LPRs).

After the bill's passage, confusion arose about whether a five-year bar on receiving SNAP also applied to these humanitarian populations once they became LPRs. In October, the USDA issued guidance on noncitizen eligibility for SNAP that failed to recognize the long-standing exception allowing humanitarian immigrants who adjust to LPR status to bypass the five-year waiting period. This prompted litigation by state attorneys general as well as significant advocacy from service providers and community organizations.

On December 9, **the USDA released updated guidance clarifying that individuals with certain humanitarian statuses who adjust to lawful permanent residence are not subject to a five-year wait for SNAP.** Exempt groups include refugees, asylees, and Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders, among others.

Federal Funding Cuts to Food Banks – The federal government canceled the Local Food Purchase Assistance Program, which had provided about \$500 million annually to food banks and other organizations to buy fresh and culturally relevant food from local producers. The government has also paused the Emergency Food Assistance Program, which provides food from the USDA to food banks. Other federal cuts such as those to programs like the Emergency Food and Shelter Program and the Community Development Block Grant have also reduced funding to food banks.

Reduced Funding and Eligibility for Free and Reduced-Price School Meals – Children are automatically enrolled in free school meals when their families receive SNAP or Medicaid. Although H.R.1 does not directly change eligibility for these meals, families losing SNAP or Medicaid will lose automatic enrollment. Many parents may be unaware they must now submit additional paperwork to qualify. Cuts to programs like Local Food for Schools have also reduced funding for schools to buy fresh, local foods for meal programs.

Increased Fears of Detention and Deportation – Heightened fears of immigration enforcement have led some individuals to leave the workforce, reducing income and the ability to afford food. Others avoid public places, including food distribution sites and schools, out of fear of detention. This can further limit access to both emergency food programs and school-based meals.

Prepare

Providers can engage in a variety of strategies to assist families with food security. Providers should reflect on their local resources, capacity, and differing staff roles as they consider possible solutions. Some ideas for consideration include:

Be familiar with existing response efforts.

- **Your city, county, or state's response.** Call your local human service department or other appropriate department to inquire if they will be providing additional services and support to help mitigate the impact of federal policy changes. You may also consider calling schools that have a predominant number of forcibly displaced students to see if they have or will be increasing weekend or emergency feeding programs.
- **Local food response organizations.** Explore if there is a local food security coalition (sometimes called a 'food policy council') that your organization can join to stay up to date on local efforts.
- **Explore advocacy efforts.** Connect with relevant state and local agencies of oversight to better understand and advocate for an inclusive response to food security and pushback on USDA's eligibility determination. Open conversations with state and local legislators about creative policy solutions to address food insecurity.
- **Ensure multiple strategies and strong referrals.** This includes:
 - **Keeping eligible families enrolled in SNAP and WIC.** Ensure that families who are eligible re-enroll and understand any constraints (such as those around WIC).
 - **Build a current list of food access referrals.** Make sure you have updated hours and locations of emergency food distribution sites and food pantries. Refer to the national [Hunger Hotline database](#) or the [Find Food Database](#) and ensure that you are clear about eligibility criteria and what clients can expect when they arrive (food selection, language resources, anything they need to bring, etc.).
 - **Ensure families know about ways to stretch their food dollars.** Most cities have markets and stores where SNAP, WIC recipients, and low-income seniors can receive additional funds for use on produce and other healthy food, such as [SNAP "double up food bucks" retailers](#), [WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program \(FMNP\)](#), and [Senior FMNP](#).
- **Consider expanding food security related services and support, such as:**
 - **Partnering to coordinate regular food distributions for clients.** Connect with emergency food assistance organizations to host a regular food distribution or pantry at your organization's office or at other local schools, gardens, or ECBOs that are accessible to clients.
 - **Working with local farming programs to source food for community food distributions.** Programs around the country have set up ["sliding scale" harvest subscription programs](#), where higher-income buyers subsidize food boxes made available to lower-income families, while the farmer still gets paid a fair price. Please consult [this guide from Switchboard](#) for more ideas.

- **Familiarizing families with local food pantries and distribution programs.** Consider using staff, volunteers, or interns to organize tours and orientations to local food access points, such as food pantries, food rescue organization, and other community food box distribution points. Families sometimes need help in understanding how these entities operate, if they are eligible, and what food is available, and also can have discomfort with language, stigma, or other cultural barriers.
- **Implementing nutrition and food navigation orientations and classes.** Consider workshops on how to eat healthy on a budget (see [Switchboard's Eating Healthy Guide for Newcomers Curriculum](#)).
- **Raise funding to help bridge the food assistance gap and support families.** Expanded food security and support takes additional funding. Funding can come through local grants, individual donors, and corporate partnerships.

Engage

Plan for how you will engage with families depending upon your role and relationship with them. Resources such as the [Trauma-Informed Nutrition Factsheet](#) are helpful to get grounded in the various reasons an individual may be food insecure, and how this informs our role. Learn more about household food security survey tools at [USDA](#). The questions below may also be helpful in determining severity of need.

1. How many days of food do you have?
2. What is preventing your household from having enough food?
3. What services or resources are you already connected to help you and your family get access to food?

If individuals or families do not have any food or a means to purchase, access or prepare it, providers should connect them with food immediately as well as resources for obtaining food for at least one week. If they do have food but are facing shortages and uncertainty regarding their future food security, utilize the resources from the “Prepare” section to develop a plan.

Listen

Because food insecurity or fears about food insecurity can be distressing, providers should be prepared for a wide range of responses and emotions when discussing this issue, including but not limited to sadness, worry, anger, frustration, and betrayal by the system. Key skills that providers can use to respond empathetically and effectively are active listening and validation.

- **Active listening** – Providers should allow space for individuals to talk and express emotion, and show that they are concentrating on, understanding and appropriately responding to what clients are saying. Active listening skills include things like:
 - **Focusing completely.** Give them your undivided attention, avoid distractions, and listen to understand rather than just to formulate a response.
 - **Engaging with non-verbal cues.** Pay attention to your body language, tone, and expressions to grasp the complete message.
 - **Showing you are listening.** Use verbal and non-verbal cues like making eye contact, nodding, and leaning in to show you are present and engaged.
 - **Using open ended questions.** Ask questions starting with “how,” “what,” or “why” to encourage deeper understanding and avoid assumptions. Responding thoughtfully. Ask clarifying questions and paraphrase or summarize what you have heard to confirm your understanding.
 - **Being empathetic.** Focus on the speaker’s feelings and perspective without judgment or immediate advice.

- **Validation** – Validation helps clients know that you are listening and that you care. Validation can include statements that affirm or normalize a client’s emotion, such as, “I think anyone would feel that way” and “That makes a lot of sense you feel that way”. It can also offer connection through empathetic statements, such as “I am so sorry you are having to go through this”.

As you respond be sure to use clear language and avoid jargon. Avoid sensational language that could cause panic. As needed, ask questions that are non-intrusive, compassionate, and helpful in identifying current needs and concerns so that you can provide the right information or refer people to the right supports.

Examples of helpful questions can be:

- Can you tell me what worries you the most?
- What specific questions do you have?
- What information would be most helpful right now?

Link

Provide links to food assistance or other services and support that may be available to families. Note, that families may need assistance in successfully accessing or navigating these services and support.

Serving Clients

- Consult Switchboard’s [“three steps you can take to ensure client food security”](#) post from 2020, still relevant today.
- Hunger Free America hosts the national [Hunger Hotline database](#) and WhyHunger has a [Find Food database](#), a good place to start in searching for emergency food resources.
- [Feeding America](#) keeps an updated list of food banks across the country.
- Database of [SNAP “double up food bucks”](#) retailers,
- Information on the [WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program \(FMNP\)](#)
- Information on the [Senior FMNP](#).
- This [trauma-informed nutrition factsheet](#) provides information on various reasons for food insecurity, and what this means for our role.
- [Income eligibility guidelines](#) for free and reduced-prices school meals.

Developing Food Security Programs

- Switchboard developed a [food and farming program development guide](#)